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ABSTRACT

The Appalachian Access and Success Project analyzed the barriers to and influences on access to higher education in the 29-county area of Ohio Appalachia. The research attempted to identify possible points of intervention to improve access rates for high school students entering 2- and 4-year colleges in the region. Surveys of 1,553 high school seniors, 422 parents, 265 high school personnel, and 164 nontraditional college students found that although 80 percent of high school seniors surveyed wanted to attend college, only about 30 percent actually did so. The high cost of higher education was perceived to be a major barrier, but students overestimated the cost of college and were unsure about their parents' income and savings. Parents in the region had a relatively low level of educational attainment, although they believed they encouraged their children to go to college. Teachers and counselors felt they did not receive sufficient information about area colleges and thought that the majority of their students were not educationally prepared for college. Students need to become more informed about resources available to them and how to apply for financial aid. School personnel should help all interested students choose a college-preparatory curriculum. (KS)

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APPALACHIAN ACCESS AND SUCCESS

RESEARCH UPDATES

DECEMBER 1992, NUMBER 1

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DECEMBER 1992
NUMBER 1

Research Updates

INSTITUTE FOR
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ADMINISTRATION AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Appalachian Access and Success

The Appalachian Access and Success Project was established in 1991 by a consortium of 10 colleges and universities located in Ohio Appalachia. Funding was provided by the Ohio Board of Regents and the Rural Universities Program.

The Appalachian Access and Success Project conducted an analysis of the barriers to, and influences on, access to higher education in the 29-county area of Ohio Appalachia. The research attempted to identify possible points of intervention to improve access rates for high school students entering two- and four-year colleges in the region.

The research data collection and analysis for the Access and Success Study was conducted by the Institute for Local Government Administration and Rural Development (ILGARD) at Ohio University in collaboration with the Project Director, Dewey Lykins, of Shawnee State University.

Study Finds Low Participation in Higher Education

The principal finding of the study was that although 80% of high school seniors surveyed want to attend college, only about 30% actually do so. This participation rate for the region is well below the rate for the state of Ohio (41%) and the entire U.S. (62.4%).

The limited participation of young people in post-secondary education is especially tragic because some barriers are only *perceived* and would disappear with adequate information and planning for college. Other barriers identified in this report, however, are very real, including the distressed economy of the region and the resulting economic hardships facing the families of Ohio Appalachia.

Whether seen from a moral perspective on the quality of opportunity or as a practical matter of the necessity for a well-educated labor force, the low rate of higher education participation in Ohio Appalachia is of great concern.

Low levels of educational attainment and skills in the region compromise attempts to solve the region's economic problems, which in turn limit access to education. Ohio Appalachia must break out of this cycle. Renewed prosperity for the region can be generated by increasing the educational attainment of its residents, while simultaneously providing employment which will utilize their skills.

How the Study Was Conducted

In addition to high school seniors, the Appalachian Access and Success study surveyed three other groups: parents, high school personnel, and "nontraditional" students who had graduated from area high schools but had not entered college until age 25 or older. Each of the four groups completed a separate written survey instrument. The

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number of questions ranged from 26 for the school personnel to 56 for the high school seniors.

The research team narrowed the 29-county sample to 12 representative counties, which were carefully chosen to reflect the overall diversity of the region. Within these 12 counties, 21 school districts were scientifically selected. City schools, local schools, exempted village schools, and a vocational school were all represented.

In all, 1,553 high school seniors out of a total enrollment of 2,242 in 21 schools responded. The students were also asked to have their parents fill out the survey form designed for parents, and 422 parents responded.

The survey was completed by 265 high school professionals, from 18 of the 21 schools. One hundred sixty-four nontraditional students from all of the region's colleges comprised the sample group for that portion of the study.

Barriers to Access to Higher Education

In each of the four areas studied, the research identified barriers which contribute to the low access rate to higher education in the region.

High School Seniors

- The high cost of higher education is a major barrier.
- The desire to earn an immediate income deters many students from going on to college.
- The students surveyed tended to overestimate the cost of college, based on a lack of information about college costs and financial aid availability.
- Even though most seniors think they must depend primarily on their parents' financial support to get a college education, most are unsure or uninformed about their parents' income and savings.
- Individual students showed a lack of self-esteem. Only a small proportion of high school seniors regard themselves as having above-average intelligence.
- Seniors are underinformed about skills required in the labor market and college programs to provide those skills.

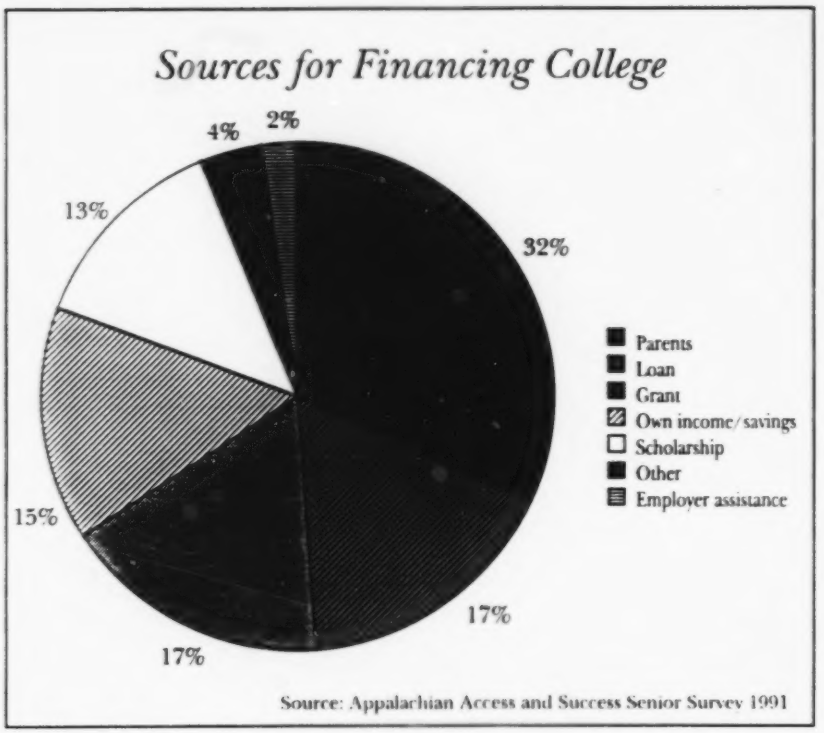
Parents

- Parents in the region have a relatively low level of educational attainment, resulting in fewer role models of the benefits of higher education for their children.
- Low average family incomes and inability to save for a child's college education are serious barriers.
- Although parents and students both believe that almost all parents encourage their children to go to college, it is unknown what form that encouragement takes or how effective it is.

High School Personnel

- Teachers and guidance counselors believe they do not receive sufficient information about area colleges and feel limited in the help they can offer students.
- High school personnel think a majority of their students are not educationally prepared for college and may not encourage the option of college for those they

- 60.1% of the high school students ranked their parents as having the most influence on their decision to attend college; they ranked their peers second; only 38.4% said they were influenced by their teachers; and 25.7% said school guidance counselors were influential.
- 45.3% of the high school seniors plan to go to a four-year college; 20.1% plan to attend a two-year college; 10.2% are unsure if they want to go to college; only 9.7% definitely do not plan to attend.
- 53.4% of the students estimated the cost of attending a two-year college at twice as much as the actual average cost; 14.2% estimated the cost to be 5 times the actual cost.
- Only 35.3% of the students believe they can afford college; 58.1% cite lack of finances as the major problem affecting their decision to pursue higher education.
- 84.4% of students reported that at least one of their two best friends is planning on going to college.
- Only 29.9% of students rate themselves as being of above-average intelligence; 25.8% of respondents rate themselves as not intelligent enough for college.
- Only 13.3% of the student respondents want to settle in the region; 57.9% do not.
- 50% of the students were unsure whether their parents had been able to save for their college education; only 23.4% said their parents had done so.
- Only 28.7% of the students' fathers and 31.4% of the students' mothers had attained some form of higher education; 31.7% of the parents did not graduate from high school.
- Only 34% of the students have siblings who have attended college.
- While 68.3% of high school personnel rated parents as the most important influence on students, only 22.6% think that more than half of all parents encourage higher education.



do not consider capable of success.

- They believe lack of parental encouragement is a major barrier to college enrollment.

Unfavorable Economic and Demographic Trends

- Per capita income in Ohio Appalachia is significantly lower than the rest of the state and the nation as a whole.

- New job growth in the service and retail sectors has outweighed significant job losses in the manufacturing and mining sectors, but wages for the newly created jobs are considerably lower. Wages fell 12% in the remaining manufacturing jobs.

- Unemployment is considerably higher in the region, especially in mining and manufacturing sectors. The number of jobs in these two sectors alone declined dramatically during the 1980s, with almost half of the mining jobs and more than 10% of manufacturing jobs eliminated.

- There is a concentration of poverty in the region. All but one of Ohio's poorest fifteen counties are located in the Appalachian region. There is a notably higher proportion of economically dependent persons in the region's population.

- Students aspire to occupations of higher socioeconomic status than those of their parents, but the regional economy cannot meet those aspirations. High school graduates are forced to settle for lower-status occupations or leave the region. Outmigration from the region of 20- to 34-year-olds is very high.

Conclusions

High school students in the region, rather than being anti-education, are more likely to be ill-informed about their options. That half of the high school seniors are unaware of whether their parents had saved for their college expenses is indicative of a larger problem: students lack information about the resources available to them.

A majority of students and parents believe that high schools are doing only a fair or poor job of promoting higher education. Nontraditional students strongly confirm this view that the needs of students are not being met. It is important that college administrators be aware of this perception as they rethink recruitment techniques and allocate resources.

Teachers' perceptions of students' ability can condition the amount and type of interaction regarding higher education. If teachers are directing their encouragement towards only certain types of students, then other students may not be receiving the information or support they need to improve their chances of entering post-secondary schooling. School personnel have an important role to play in helping students choose a curriculum and in promoting college-preparatory curricula for all students who have an interest in continuing on to higher education.

Among the factors influencing participation in higher education or the choice of a college, financial aid availability was mentioned by most parents, with a majority saying it was the most important consideration. The majority of parents in Ohio Appalachia are clearly unable to save for their children's college education or to finance it without recourse to other sources of funding. Government financial aid programs have yet to achieve the goal of ensuring equal access to higher education.

If public funding sources are to be relied on to a great extent to finance a college education, high school students require a thorough understanding of the processes necessary to apply for financial aid. Those who need the most assistance—students from low-income families, whose parents have lower educational attainment—are probably the least well-equipped to complete the complex, difficult, and intimidating process of applying for college and for financial aid.

The view of a college education as the preserve of a small intellectual elite is out of date. Increasingly, higher education is a requirement for success in many sectors of the labor market and should therefore be open to a much wider range of individuals. The study showed that students, parents, and educators all have a high level of awareness of changing economic conditions and the importance of higher education to both individuals and the regional economy.

Increasing the rate at which residents of Ohio Appalachia participate in higher education is a critical concern of the region. The complexity of modern society demands ever-higher levels of knowledge and skills from its citizens, both in the labor force and in everyday life. Although the Appalachian region has in the past been able to rely on low labor costs to attract new industry, this is no longer sufficient. The importance of labor skills now outweighs that of labor costs. If individuals are not educated to meet the demands of the labor market, not only will they themselves suffer economically, but the strength and dynamism of the regional economy will also be compromised.

For a copy of the complete "Appalachian Access and Success" report, contact Dewey Lykins, Shawnee State University, 940 Second Street, Portsmouth, Ohio 45662.

Source: Appalachian Access and Success Senior Survey 1991

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